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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000850

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: PROTESTS CONTINUE - NO NEGOTIATIONS FOR
NOW

REF: TBILISI 0842

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: Protests continued through the weekend although crowds only numbered around 500-1500. Roads remained blocked by "cells" and the opposition announced that more disruptions are being planned. A May 2 concert featuring Levan Gachechiladze's brother, Utsnobi ("Unknown" or "Anonymous") failed to draw much of a crowd. EU representative Peter Semneby spent the weekend in Tbilisi trying to bring some opposition members to the negotiating table, but was unable to do so. Indications are that Irakli Alasania is willing to consider the idea of a negotiated settlement and is working toward building some consensus among the non-parliamentary opposition. We understand that Alasania met Parliamentary Speaker Bakradze May 3 to discuss a way out. GoG-organized focus groups show decreasing support for the non-parliamentary opposition but also, no support (including from Government supporters) for using force to stop the protests. The Ambassador urged Minister of Internal Affairs Vano Merabishvili, to continue to exercise restraint. The Ambassador also met with Nino Burjanadze who conceded that the protests have not been going as well as hoped, but showed little willingness to negotiate. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: Despite Peter Semneby's efforts, there is little indication that the non-parliamentary opposition is currently willing to negotiate. Irakli Alasania (Alliance) appears to be contemplating a move but has not been able to attract any other leader to join him. For now, at least, the non-parliamentary opposition is considering further roadblocks, appearing to hope that further inconveniencing the public will somehow bring different political results. Alasania wants political cover but there are few, if any signs, that other non-parliamentary leaders are willing to negotiate. Indeed, most seem to be unwilling to confront what Post and the EU are hearing, and GoG focus groups show - that the non-parliamentary opposition is losing support by the day. The possibility of creating more roadblocks and "cell" cities is a negative development; nevertheless, we continue to push for all sides to engage in meaningful dialogue. End Comment.

Protests Numbers Still Small - Escalation Discussed

¶3. (C) The protesters numbered around 500-1500 Friday, May 1, Saturday, May 2, and Sunday May 3, despite a free concert given by Utsnobi. Sunday grew an especially small crowd that Embassy observers estimated at 100-200 in front of Parliament. In spite of the numbers, the non-parliamentary opposition remains defiant. Kakha Kukhava (Conservatives) announced that no change in strategy was needed as the rallies had been a success. Salome Zourabichvili (Georgia's Way) called for a new April 9 to combat GoG claims that support was waning. Although no further pickets or roadblocks have been set up, non-parliamentary leaders are

considering blocking major roads into Tbilisi on May 5, as well as setting up cells in front of the new City Hall. Protests are scheduled to continue May 4.

GoG Still Patient - Watching Focus Groups

14. (C) The Ambassador spoke to Minister of the Interior, Vano Merabishvili, on Friday May 1, and commended the GoG's restraint and patience in handling the protests so far. The Ambassador also cautioned Merabishvili about using force to dislodge protesters. (Embassy Note: The Ambassador Qdislodge protesters. (Embassy Note: The Ambassador delivered the same message to Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria. End Note.) Merabishvili told the Ambassador that MOIA would continue to allow protests as long as they were peaceful, and wished to avoid any use of force. Merabishvili (and other GoG contacts) said its focus groups showed widespread dissatisfaction with the non-parliamentary opposition. The GoG was given relatively good marks for its handling of the situation. Nonetheless, even UNM supporters did not support using force to dislodge the protesters, something according to Merabishvili, something the GoG had taken to heart. Our GoG interlocutors believe that at least a number of non-parliamentary opposition leaders are looking for violence.

Alasania Again Flirting with Dialogue - Moderation

15. (C) According to the EU's Peter Semneby, Alasania is planning to present a new negotiating strategy to the other opposition leaders at a "make or break" meeting. Semneby told the Ambassador that Alasania was looking for political cover. Semneby spent the weekend talking to various

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non-parliamentary opposition members who did not seem to be on the same page as Alasania regarding negotiations. Semneby reported that it took over an hour to get Levan Gachechiladze to concede that "negotiations are not inconceivable". Semneby also told non-parliamentary opposition leaders bluntly that blocking more roads was "monumentally stupid". Alasania, despite his apparent willingness to negotiate and public statement reiterating his desire to engage in dialogue, has avoided a long planned meeting with Speaker Bakradze, one in which he told the Ambassador he would have late last week. We understand that the meeting finally took place May 3. (Embassy Comment: Any willingness to negotiate must be viewed as a positive sign. Alasania will likely faces an uphill climb to find any likely partners in the current non-parliamentary group who are willing to join him. End Comment.)

Nino Burjanadze - Lost

16. (C) The Ambassador met with Nino Burjanadze (Democratic Movement - United Georgia) for a frank discussion about the protests. Burjanadze admitted the protests had not worked yet, and in between angry monologues about Saakashvili, seemed to understand the Ambassador's point of view that the cell cities, the violence (perpetrated by the opposition), paying for protesters, and unwillingness to negotiate was further damaging her image. Burjanadze lamented that she had to work with such a group of idiots (the non-parliamentary opposition) who thought the cells were a good idea. She returned to the idea that Saakashvili forced her into her current predicament, taking no responsibility for her own complicity in her radical turn. Burjanadze refused to entertain negotiations and reiterated her one demand, but could not articulate any strategy to bring about Saakashvili's resignation. Burjanadze repeated that polls, focus groups, and PR machines (the GoG) do not represent actual Georgian opinion, preferring like most in the non-parliamentary opposition to believe her gut feelings. Nevertheless, Burjanadze conceded that the opposition does not look good but would not back down from its sole demand. (Embassy Comment: Burjanadze conceded little but was clearly

in a dour, somber mood not indicative of high confidence of success. The Director of the Georgian Intelligence Service, Gela Bezhuashvili described her as "lost". End Comment.)
TEFFT